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ABSTRACT

The personal-growth model of the language arts, based on views expressed at the 1966 Dartmouth Seminar, emphasizes creative drama as important in contributing to children's language development. However, any increase in creative drama within language arts programs is jeopardized by current conditions, which include limited economic resources, teacher cutbacks, declining enrollments, the back-to-basics movement, and the movement to provide additional funding for the gifted (which might appropriate whatever dramatics effort does exist). This paper points out that proponents of creative dramatics need to understand and experience some of the uses of language which spontaneous drama permits, discusses a schema for varying styles of language, and examines the use of these styles in drama activity. The paper gives examples of participatory work in creative dramatics and states, in conclusion, that carefully controlled longitudinal research is needed to support the inclusion of creative drama in language arts programs. (JM)

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Creative Drama: A Program Rationale Via Participant Involvement

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The Last Decade and the Next

The last decade has been a most eventful one for those involved with the elementary language arts, and as one looks ahead to the next decade it appears that the degree of change will not diminish. However, the nature of the curricular emphases in the next decade may differ markedly from those in the earlier period.

One of the major stimuli for change in the last decade was the Dartmouth Seminar[1] held in 1966. As a result of the conference, a personal growth model of the language arts, somewhat akin to that of the Progressive Education era, re-emerged. This model was based on the premise stated by John Dixon, author of the report of the conference, that:

> in sharing experience with others man is using language to make the experience real to himself. The selection and shaping that language involves, the choices between alternative expressions so that the language shall fit the experience and bring it to life "as it really was"--these activities imply imaginative work. If we could observe all the occasions when a child uses language in this way, and put them together, we should have caught a glimpse of a representational world that the child has built up to fit reality as he knows it. (1975, p.6)

[1] The Dartmouth Seminar is the common name for a conference held at Dartmouth College in 1966 entitled the Anglo American Conference on the Teaching of English. Fifty American and British English educators participated in the conference to discuss issues regarding the English curriculum.

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During the last decade programs in this country began to show influence of the Dartmouth view that language is learned in operation, not by dummy-runs. Language in operation was described as free movement between dialogue and monologue and between talk, drama, writing, and literature to build up a store of shared experience from which each child can draw in building a personal representation of experience. (Dixon, 1975, p. 13)

In the personal growth model, creative drama was seen as a central focus emerging from talk but differing from it in three ways as cited by Douglas Barnes at the Seminar:

1. movement and gesture play a larger part in the expression of meaning;

2. a group working together upon an improvisation needs more deliberately and consciously to collaborate . . .;

3. the narrative framework allows for repetition and provides a unity that enables the action more easily to take on symbolic status. (Dixon, 1975, p. 37)

Data is not available as to the number of school districts in the United States involving children in experiences in creative drama, nor on the specific influence of Dartmouth. However, any increases in involvement in creative drama resulting from recent publications, curriculum guides, college courses, and in-service efforts are jeopardized by current conditions including limited economic resources, teacher cut-backs, declining enrollments, the "back to the basics" movement which stresses mastery of narrowly defined skills, and the concurrent movement to provide additional funding for the gifted. The latter movement may make what creative dramatics exists in the schools something for only the chosen few, not an integral part of the language arts program important for all children.

Faced with these counter movements, proponents of creative dramatics need to face critical questions regarding the efficacy of participation in creative dramatics experiences as a regular part of the language arts program. To date, while vast claims are made concerning the effects of creative dramatics, these are not supported by a body of empirical research which is still in its infancy in this complex field.

Faced with this situation, what I propose to do in the remaining time is to let you experience some of the uses of language which spontaneous drama permits, discuss a schema for varying styles of language, and to examine use of these styles in the drama activity.

Participatory Work in Creative Dramatics[1]

Now so that we can share a common base of experience for later talk, let's become involved in some dramatic activity.

1. Listening Exercise

Close your eyes, please, if you will. Shut out every sound that exists except the sound of your own natural breathing or your own heartbeat. Don't breathe in any special way, just the sound of your own natural breathing.

Now listen to any sounds that you can hear inside the room that we are sitting in.

Now listen to any sounds that you can hear outside the room but in the building.

Now listen to sounds just outside the building, on the street outside or in the nearby environment.

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[1] Ideas for dramatic activity are adapted from Development Through Drama by Brian Way (1967).

Now listen to sounds in your own home. And now to your own natural breathing.

2. Colors

Now open your eyes and look at the back of one hand. How many colors can you see in the back of one hand? Don't try to tell me about it, just notice how many different colors you can see.

Now see if you can find any of the colors somewhere else in the room. Maybe in the walls, carpet, or furniture.

Now turn to a partner near you and share together the sounds you heard or the colors you saw and how they might have matched up. Chat with a partner about the different experiences you had. *

3. Cymbal Signal

Good, you reacted just as you should when you heard the cymbal sound. You froze. Whenever you hear it today I wonder if you can stop talking or moving so quickly that you would be like a statue frozen right in the middle of a word. Do you think you can? Shall we try? Tell your partner about what might have been making a sound you heard, showing them what it was like.

* Good. Let's see if you can freeze that quickly whenever you hear the sound today.

4. Details of Architecture

A moment ago you noticed colors in the room. Now examine the overall architecture of the room. Notice all its details in such a way that you could sketch a plan of it when you are no longer here.

Now find a partner and without looking around describe features you've noticed. *

5. Use for the Room

Now in a minute when I say so, not before, form a group of five. And in your group decide on a use other than a meeting room or a room in a hotel for this room you've examined so carefully. Decide on a use and decide on a way to advertise it over the radio to convince others of its value for the purpose you see. Your ad can be only thirty seconds long. It must involve every member in an active role and you can involve only one person as an announcer. You will have 2 minutes to plan your ad. Begin now. (2 minutes) *

Now you've had time to plan your ads to sell this space. When you hear the cymbal begin your thirty second commerical ending it when you hear the cymbal again. Begin now. * (1 minute) *

Talk in your group about your commerical to sell the space. *

Let's hear from each group in a word or two about the use you planned for the room.

This brief bit of drama work can serve to highlight the contributions which creative dramatics can make to the development of a child's competence with a range of linguistic styles serving differing functions.

Styles of Language Involved in Drama

To examine the range of functions of language offered in a creative dramatics experience it is helpful to refer to James Britton's schema of language functions. (1971) Britton, in exploring the functions of extended discourse, has identified two major roles of language use. One is the participant role in which the speaker operates in the actual world, using language to get something done. The second role is the spectator role in which the speaker uses language representationally or symbolically, being "concerned with events not now taking

place (past events or imagined events), / being / concerned with them per se . . . and not as a means to some ongoing transaction with the actual" (Britton, 1971, p. 209).

Britton also discusses functions of language centering on the expressive function which "straddles the participant/spectator distinction," (1971, p. 210) as shown in the model. The transactional function is the full participant role, while the poetic function, or language involving the verbal arts, is the full spectatorial role. Expressive language, the mode most used in personal face-to-face communication, is free to move between participatory and spectatorial language. For example, if on your return from this trip you begin to tell a colleague of your experience you may begin in the expressive spectatorial mode. You may shift to participatory expressive language if the colleague inquires about the meetings you attended. If the colleague is most responsive to your story you may shift to the poetic function of language if you begin to construct a story of convention experiences. If, however, your colleague is a superior who asks that you justify time and financial support for the trip based on your attendance at meetings you may switch quickly to the transactional function of participatory language. Most likely, however, as Britton notes in a similar example, you and your colleague would continue in the expressive function to exchange experiences, ideas, and reactions, sometimes in the participatory role and sometimes in the spectatorial role. (1971, p. 210)

Varying Uses of Language in Creative Dramatics

Having established a theory of the varying uses of language based on the function language serves and the purpose or role of the generator and receiver of the language, consideration should return to the question of the role which

Britton, James, What's the Use? A Schematic Account of Language Functions, "The Context of Language." A.M. Wilkinson, editor. Educational Review, Vol. 23, June, 1971, p. 210.

creative dramatics can play in providing opportunities for such uses of language. Even in our brief experience with creative dramatics both participatory and spectatorial uses of language occurred.

In reflecting with a partner on sounds and colors or the details of the room you experienced, spectatorial language was employed, probably in the expressive mode, as you were involved in verbal image-making to share experiences. Had someone been so moved by their sounds or colors as to move from any immediate concern for the sharing to ultimate attention to the shaping of experience then the poetic function would have been employed. Though use of poetic language seems unlikely in this situation it is clearly possible in dramatic experiences of greater depth and involvement.

Throughout the experience as you received instructions the participatory role was employed, as it was in your two minutes of planning for the ad. Actually doing the ad represents one of the fascinating dualities of language function which drama permits and shows how drama can widen the range of linguistic opportunities and voices which a child can experience. On the one hand your use of language in creating the ad was participatory since you were acting in the real world to sell the room. However, since imagined events were involved the language was spectatorial. Through drama children can operate in the "real world" at a participatory level without the limits or burdens of their own reality. That creative drama offers the child opportunity to use such varied styles of language adds to its contributions to the total language arts program.

Carefully controlled longitudinal research is needed to support this rationale for the contributions of creative drama in developing facility in the use of language for both its more commonly recognized role of symbolism

to make reality from experience and for growth in ability to use language for all its functions, a goal important in a comprehensive language arts program. This is only one important research question regarding the contributions of creative dramatics which needs to be undertaken in this period of educational turmoil.

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